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ABSTRACT

The outgoing president of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, (NASDSE), voices his concerns over trends in special education. He notes the lack of attention devoted to speech education in the most recent reports on the status of education, suggests the existence of a subtle attitude of complacency regarding achievements for handicapped children, and questions the possibility that compliance is equated with excellence. He fears that traditional questions of educational parity may be reduced to issues of simple lost-benefit criteria and that emphasis on evaluation may be used to rationalize reducing or eliminating P.L. 94-142, the Education For All Handicapped Children Act. (CL)

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# A DYNAMIC EQUILIBRIUM

Robert S. Black, President
National Association of State Directors of Special Education

October, 1983

Chicago, Illinois

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As the minutes of my Presidency tick away, there are many thoughts, concerns, and some ambivalences I would share with you.

First, I would be less than candid if I did not tell you that I am sad that my year as your President has come to an end. I have both actually and actively enjoyed it. But why have I enjoyed it so much? It has been demanding on my time--and, at times, tumultuous. We have been faced with problems that seemed insurmountable. Herein probably lies the answer.

(1) No President has enjoyed a better Board--Joe Fisher, Peter Fanning, Martha Irvin, Roger Brown, Diane Petersen, Gary Makuch, and Charlie Harrington. This was a Board that enjoyed challenges, dealing with difficulties, and whose vision was more than maintaining a status quo!

(2) We have enjoyed a positive interaction with the NASDSE staff.

(3) We have made tangible progress, I think, in furthering both the ethic and business of NASDSE.

But the question must be asked again, and again: What should be the business of NASDSE and how do each of our myriad activities contribute to that end?

And this brings me to the central issue of my message.

I rather doubt if there is anyone in this room who is not pleased with the new found attention education is currently receiving. In reading A Nation at Risk, you,

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as I, kept looking for reference to the education of handicapped children. Only through exaggerated inference could I find any suggestion of our work. Indeed, I sent letters to its purported authors; to big league magazines that showcased the report. To date, I have yet to receive any acknowledgements. Perhaps my paranoia is showing, but this does trouble me a great deal for several reasons:

(1) We in special education have made herculean progress in the last few decades. This is a matter of fact, of record. Twenty-five years ago, as I was flying piston driven aircraft, fellow passengers required an explanation of special education. Today, as I'm lodged between jet engines and restrooms, they all know what special education is.

(2) Is there a growing aura of complacency towards the handicapped on the part of high level decision makers? Is there, indeed, a subtle attitude, perhaps non-verbalized, that we are now doing all that can be done for handicapped children? I do not mean this in a negative sense; rather, I think I sense a belief that we have found El Dorado in our search for excellence. In reviewing the initiatives of several states in their general quest for quality, I fail to see much inclusion of the handicapped in grandiose planning. I am confident that there must be some exceptions.

(3) I fear that some may be equating procedural compliance with excellence. I think, as a nation, we have made remarkable achievements in finding our handicapped children, getting them in school and protecting their civil rights. To be sure, some are receiving optimal instructional programs. But then, I begin looking at longitudinal studies and find a void of meaningful information, so one must raise the question to what end are we doing what we are doing.

I have some lurking suspicions that the equality of expenditure rationale is surfacing again if, indeed, it ever vanished. George Will states it very well in an

article in the Washington Post and was read into the Congressional Record by Senator Weicker: "Note this dangerous doctrine: handicapped persons are getting too much public assistance, by some cost-benefit criterion. They do not have the capacity to make a sufficiently "positive" contribution to society. Note the nasty premise: An individual's enjoyment of rights is conditioned by the individual's social utility".

This poses an old problem with a new twist. We have long fought for parity in terms of educational opportunity. Money, per se, was not at issue. If, indeed, new infusions of opportunity are available for the non-handicapped population, can we rightly expect increased opportunities for the handicapped to be included as part of the package?

Much rhetoric has transpired about the notion of inproving education through a marriage of the public and private sectors. Should business and industry become heavy investors in American public education and improved quality be a result thereof for the non-handicapped populace, where does this leave the handicapped from the point of a dynamic equilibrium?

As we stand back and look at the Gestalt, is there a concern that we may very well end up in fighting among ourselves within the educational community? I don't know, but it is troubling.

I believe with all my heart that difficult though it was to implement the procedural requirements of P.L. 94-142, it was simplistic when compared with the struggle for quality and parity--assuming that the "new quality" will be supported, in part, by means we have not known heretofore.

Let me turn to the issue of evaluation. Increasingly, I hear that P.L. 94-142 must be evaluated to determine its effectiveness in serving our nation's handicapped. No one would disagree with the notion of evaluation--it is as much a part of the American idiom as "Elm Street, U.S.A." But wait--what kind of

evaluations are being discussed? I have no problem, rather I encourage, evaluation of those macro consequences of the Act that can be evaluated. I urge evaluations which can help us to do a better job in teaching children. But, I abhor any evaluation which may become the rationale for reducing or eliminating the Act on the basis that some children are showing little progress. Again, this brings us to the intolerable notion that an individual's rights are in direct proportion to his potential for achievement and subsequent contributions to society.

Can we, as NASDSE, throughout the nation, take a leadership role in properly evaluating special education?

Can we, as NASDSE, continue the struggle for a new parity in a meaningful way?

Can we, as NASDSE, help decision makers understand that while we have made progress, many needed and "doable" achievements have yet to be realized?

I think we, as individuals, and we, as an Association, can do no less.

As I turn the gavel over to Joe Fisher and a new Board, I do so with great confidence in the future of NASDSE. Our Association has a rich heritage. We are a presence on the American educational landscape. May we continue to be so with confidence, positiveness and kindliness!

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